

Exploring Parental Involvement Strategies Utilized by Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams

Chris Robbins and Linda Searby

Abstract

Adolescents present a unique collection of characteristics and challenges which middle school interdisciplinary teams were designed to address. This article describes a research study which explored parental involvement strategies employed by interdisciplinary teaching teams from three very different middle schools: an affluent suburban school, a mid-level rural school, and a high-poverty urban school. A multiple-case study approach was used, and interdisciplinary teams at each middle school were interviewed, responded to journal questions, and were observed at parent nights and related events. Parents were also included as participants through focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and written questionnaires. The researcher identified themes within each setting, as well as four cross-case themes. All of the interdisciplinary teams in this research study utilized strategies grounded in a belief regarding the essential role parental involvement plays, maintained an open and approachable attitude toward parents, served as a resource to parents, and approached problem-solving opportunities as a team. The findings of this study serve as a bridge between what is known about adolescent development, best middle school interdisciplinary teaming models, and the essential nature of parental involvement in education.

Key Words: middle schools, junior high, parental involvement, interdisciplinary teams, parents, family, strategies, multiple case study, teachers, teaming, roles, developmentally appropriate, conferences, welcoming

Introduction

Middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers have available to them a unique “table of opportunities” (Rottier, 2000, p. 214) with great potential to engage students and parents with multiple and varied methods of curricular design, instructional methods, and development and training strategies. However, many middle school interdisciplinary teams across the U.S. are settling for “hors d’oeuvres” (Rottier, 2000, p. 214), only scratching the surface of what can be done to engage parents as partners in their child’s education. One of the primary purposes of middle school interdisciplinary teams is to communicate and engage parents while developing and implementing curriculum based on an adolescents’ developmental needs (Conley, Fauske, & Pounder, 2004). Throughout the notoriously turbulent time of adolescence, the adolescent-parent relationship becomes a regular source of stress in many families, and many schools have recognized the need to reengage parents as a resource for adolescent support (Richardson, 2004).

The Carnegie Corporation of New York issued *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (1989), focusing middle level educators on the unique nature and developmental needs of early adolescent students. In this publication, middle school interdisciplinary teams were identified as a necessary mechanism to support the adolescent and involve the parent in the educational process (Carnegie Council, 1989). Tonso, Jung, and Colombo (2006), when speaking of middle school interdisciplinary teaming, cited communication with parents as an organizational practice most likely to result in achievement gains and viewed the middle school interdisciplinary team as an effective tool to engage parents. Effective middle school interdisciplinary teams engage parents as partners in education, and strategies to accomplish this goal should be intentionally orchestrated and systematically implemented (Carnegie Council, 1989). Yet organizing teachers into groups, labeling them a team, and expecting them to engage parents in the schooling process will not automatically produce positive outcomes without implicitly and intentionally training teachers to utilize the full measure of their team structure (Boyer & Bishop, 2004; Rottier, 2000; Tonso et al., 2006).

Research clearly outlines the connection between involved parents and student achievement. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) composed a theoretical model of the parental involvement process to connect parental involvement with student achievement. The model is composed of three major constructs of parental motivation: parental role construction (perceptions regarding how they are supposed to interact), parental self-efficacy (perceptions regarding their personal abilities to affect positive change), and opportunities and

barriers for involvement (perceptions of invitations for involvement from students and teachers and perceived life context variables; Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998; Green, Walker, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). Specifically, they aimed to uncover the answers to three primary questions: (1) Why do parents become involved in children's education? (2) What do they do when they get involved? and (3) How does their involvement influence the student's outcomes? (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model addresses general parental motivations for becoming an involved parent and clearly ties parental perceptions of educational involvement with outcomes.

However, there appears to be a gap in the current research. The available research tends to focus on general parent-teacher communication benefits and strategies, with a rare emphasis on middle school interdisciplinary team teacher parental involvement strategies (Erb, 1997; Gulino & Valentine, 1999; Hill & Tyson, 2009). After a thorough review of the literature, it appears that only a modest amount of literature specifically addresses how an interdisciplinary team approach to involving parents alters the face of parent-teacher communication and benefits adolescents.

Theoretical Framework for Parental Involvement

The model of parent involvement chosen for this study was the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parental involvement (1995, 1997, 2005) which focuses on the motivators behind parents' decisions to become involved in their child's educational process (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The model describes three motivations for parental involvement: motivational beliefs, perceptions of invitations, and perceived life context (see Figure 1).

Middle school interdisciplinary teams are capable of acting as a positive support for parents in each of the three areas outlined in the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model. By clearly defining parental roles and aiding parents to increased levels of efficacy, middle school teams can potentially create confidence in a parent's ability to support their middle school child. The second factor, parents' perceptions of invitations from others, is another factor that middle school teams can affect for positive change in levels of parental involvement. When a parent experiences perceived increases in invitations for involvement from the school, teachers, and students, their involvement is very likely to increase. The last factor is parental perceived life context, which is composed of parental perceptions of time, energy, skills, and knowledge. Middle school teaming structures have the potential to increase a parent's skill and knowledge base of middle-school-specific, home-based strategies which may aid in increasing a student's achievement. In each of these three areas, middle school

interdisciplinary teams can positively impact the level of parental motivation for involvement.

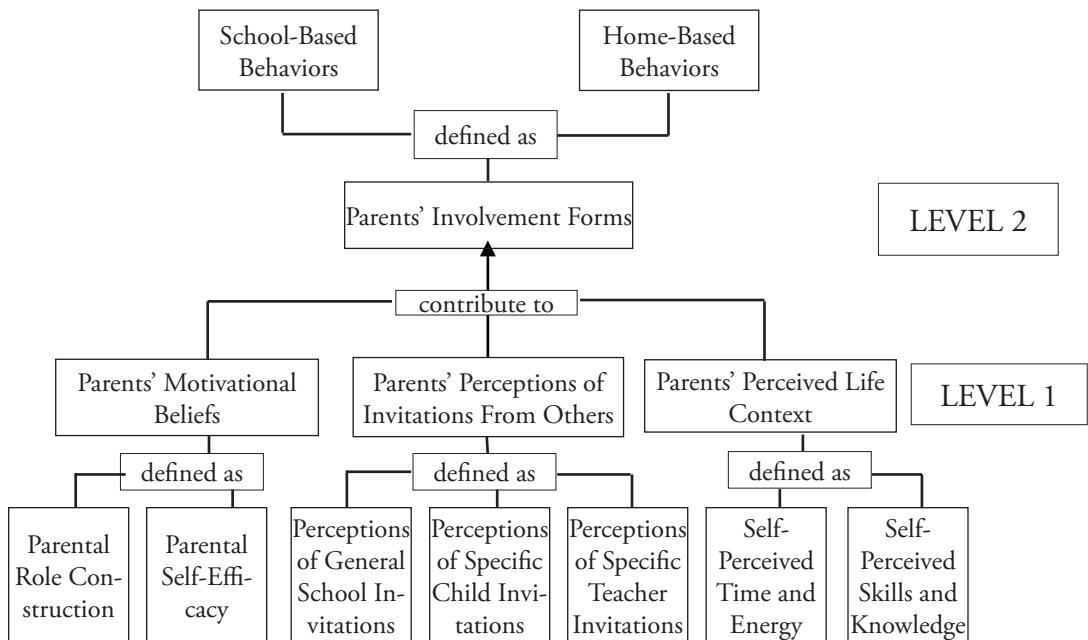


Figure 1. Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (2005)

Family culture also factors into parental involvement decisions. In the framework, researchers stated that schools “must respect and respond to family culture and family circumstances in order to access the full power of parental support for learning” (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005, p. 116). From the perspective of school staff, many family cultures may appear to contain ineffective support systems, such as first or second generation immigrants, those with limited parental educational background, cultural or situational poverty, or other culturally limiting factors (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). However, support systems may vary depending upon cultural backgrounds, parental experiences, skills, and knowledge. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and González (2001) and González, Moll, and Amanti (2005) emphasize the importance of educators becoming intimately familiar with the culture of a student’s household, country of origin, background, and available support systems through constant communication and home visits. As Shumow (2011) states, “researchers have repeatedly documented that parents with low income, limited education, or minority status are just as likely to help their children with homework as other parents” (p. 77). Dramatic positive shifts take place in school–home relationships when

educators take the time to uncover the strengths of culturally diverse families (González et al., 2005; Moll et al., 2001).

Parent involvement varies in its form and structure and may change over time and from area to area. Epstein (1995) outlines six different categories of parental involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with community. Parental involvement may shift from primarily home-centered forms to largely community and whole-school methods. However, all effective parental involvement necessitates contributions from the parents toward the scholastic success of their child (Epstein, 1995).

Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams

The middle school interdisciplinary team may be the ideal middle school fit for improved implementation of the factors that contribute to parental involvement according to the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parental involvement. Interdisciplinary team teaching is a “signature practice of the middle school design” (Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe, & Melton, 1993, p. 49). Wallace (2007) described middle school interdisciplinary teaming as “the root of most of the successful middle level programs today” (p. 1).

The overarching purpose of the middle school interdisciplinary team is to engage an adolescent learner in ways that an individual teacher is less capable of doing—creating smaller and more supportive learning communities within the larger context of the middle school (Wallace, 2007). The structure of an interdisciplinary team of teachers may vary from two-teacher teams to five-teacher teams, depending upon financial resources, school size, grade level structure, and state certification challenges (MacIver & Epstein, 1993). In general, however, four teachers (math, science, social studies, and language arts) compose an interdisciplinary team and share between 90 and 120 students in the same grade level (Clark, 1997; Crow & Pounder, 2000; Hackmann et al., 2002). Teachers from other content areas (e.g., electives, exploratory classes, physical education) may be integrated into these teams (Crow & Pounder, 2000). Additionally, the middle school support staff—such as counselors, special education teachers, and administrators—may participate with the core interdisciplinary teams in a consultative role to aid in addressing student issues. Middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers are central to addressing the challenge of educating adolescents by addressing the social, emotional, and cognitive needs of their students.

Methodology

Research Question and Method

A qualitative multiple case study approach was utilized to answer the research question: What are the strategies utilized by interdisciplinary middle school teams to effectively involve the parents of their students in the educational process? In order to maximize the insight gleaned from the participants, three middle school interdisciplinary teams were purposefully selected as cases to participate in this study from three different Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW) certified middle schools in Alabama: one suburban middle school (labeled Alpha Middle School), one rural middle school (labeled Beta Middle School), and one urban middle school (labeled Gamma Middle School). These MMGW schools maintain their MMGW certification through a displayed commitment to research-based middle school best practices, which include having a rigorous academic core, holding student achievement in high regard, using data-driven decision making, collaboration with interdisciplinary teams, exhibiting strong school leadership, and emphasizing parental involvement and support.

The case selection process began with a complete list of all 131 MMGW certified schools in the state of Alabama. Utilizing this list, the researcher narrowed down the sites based upon geographical proximity to central Alabama and their classification as urban, suburban, and rural schools. The researcher discussed these sites with the director of MMGW Alabama in order to solicit her selections for central Alabama MMGW middle schools that have established highly successful teaming models. Next, the researcher gained all necessary district- and school-level written permissions to conduct research. The researcher conducted a selection meeting with the principal at each research site. During this meeting, the principal was responsible for two major tasks. First, the principal reviewed a list of research-based characteristics of effective middle school interdisciplinary teams. Next, the principal selected one interdisciplinary team of teachers that, based upon the principal's experiences and observations of the team, most resembled these research-based characteristics. After the principal selected the team of teachers, the researcher met with each of the selected middle school interdisciplinary teams to introduce the purpose of the research and review the research process. Upon acceptance of research protocols and obtaining informed consent, data collection procedures began at each data collection site. By allowing site selection to take place by an outside expert in the middle school field, the researcher attempted to obtain local school sites which most effectively employed MMGW research-based, standard middle school practices. The purpose of these case selection procedures was to obtain a participant

sample of teams that exhibited high levels of knowledge and implementation of effective middle school interdisciplinary teaming strategies and had already demonstrated their strategies and abilities to work as a middle school team to involve parents to a high degree.

Data Collection

Qualitative case study research typically gathers data from multiple sources in order to gain the most complete and thorough exploratory picture of the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, 2008; Yin, 2009). Over the course of nine weeks (August–October), the researcher in this study continuously collected data from multiple and varied sources including: (a) multiple team interviews; (b) multiple team meeting observations; (c) ongoing team document review; (d) multiple teacher email prompts; (e) a parent questionnaire; and (f) multiple parent focus groups. From these data, emerging themes were outlined, analyzed, and explored further.

Team Interviews

Throughout the course of the research project, the researcher conducted multiple interdisciplinary team interviews. Team interviews occurred during the team's regularly scheduled weekly team meeting period. All interdisciplinary team members were present in the interview, and previously created interview protocols were followed. The interview questions were derived from the seven components of parental motivations for involvement from the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parental involvement (1995, 1997, 2005; see Figure 1). The interviews were semi-structured; the researcher took notes as the questions were asked and responses were offered. With the permission of the participants, the team interviews were audiorecorded and later transcribed. For the sake of anonymity, participants and schools are identified by pseudonyms throughout this study.

Team Document/Regular Correspondence Review

The researcher gathered school and interdisciplinary team-related documents or other documents described as regular school–home correspondence. These items included: (a) school letters and bulletins; (b) class syllabi; (c) team introductory letters; (d) parent night PowerPoint presentations; (e) field trip forms; (f) parent update emails; and (g) individual notes to parents regarding team business.

Teacher Email Prompts

The researcher requested that each of the team teachers respond to weekly parental involvement email prompts. Examples of email prompts include, “In

what ways do you invite parents to be involved in your team?” and “How does a middle school team make parents feel more welcome to be involved in their children’s education?” The email prompts were derived from questions relating to the seven components of parental motivations for involvement from Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parental involvement (1995, 1997, 2005; see Figure 1). The researcher emailed the teachers with an email prompt, and the teachers responded on an individual basis with their thoughts, impressions, interactions, successes, failures, strategies, and frustrations relating to parental involvement.

Parent Questionnaire

The researcher issued one anonymous researcher-generated parent questionnaire to the parents of all of the students on each middle school interdisciplinary team. Epstein’s (1995) six types of parental involvement and the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parental involvement (1995, 1997, 2005) served as the basis for the questions contained on the questionnaire. Data collected through the questionnaire were utilized to further identify themes related to effective parental involvement strategies and perceptions of effective parental involvement. A total of 367 parent questionnaires were distributed across the three middle schools; 107 were returned (an overall response rate of 29.2%). Recent response rates of similar survey types distributed throughout other school districts revealed similar response rates; therefore, the researcher believes the response rates from this study are typical. For example, the Fort Worth Independent School District’s 2011–2012 Parent Survey report indicates a response rate of 28.3% (Morrissey & Yuan, 2012); the Los Angeles Unified School District’s average parent response rate in 2012 was only 18% (LAUSD, 2012).

Parent Focus Groups

The researcher conducted two parent focus groups at each site during the data collection period, a total of six parent focus groups. Although labeled as “parent” focus groups, multiple students were actually represented at the focus groups by caregivers such as aunts, uncles, or grandparents instead, indicating a guardianship situation in the child’s home. All of the parents from the team were invited to attend; however, team teachers were not invited to attend. Epstein’s (1995) six types of parental involvement and the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parental involvement (1995, 1997, 2005) served as the foundation for the focus group questions. With the permission of the parent participants, the focus groups were audiorecorded and later transcribed. The focus of the data collection within the parent focus groups was to gauge

parents' perceptions of effective involvement, as well as to explore the level of parents' satisfaction with current parental involvement practices. A total of 21 parents were included in focus groups across all three middle schools. Of the 21 total parents, 8 were from Alpha Middle School (suburban), 10 from Beta Middle School (rural), and 3 were from Gamma Middle School (urban).

As expected, the cultural makeup of the parent focus groups varied between research sites. The suburban research site, Alpha, was mostly composed of upper-middle-class Caucasian families, although several minority parents (African American and Middle Eastern) were included in the focus groups. The focus groups at the rural research site, Beta, was evenly composed of working-class Caucasian parents and African American parents. The urban school site, Gamma, did have the highest percentage of minority parents, including African American and Latino parents, with only one Caucasian parent included. The Gamma research site had the highest poverty rate of the three middle schools. These parent focus group differences reflect the same general demographic makeup of the overall school population at each research site.

Data Analysis

Consistent with qualitative multiple-case study protocols, data analysis occurred throughout the course of the research study (Stake, 1995, 2006). Immediately following the team interviews, team meeting observations, and the parent focus groups, the researcher prepared the data for analysis by transcribing the recordings into textual formats. The researcher read through the data to obtain a general sense of the material. Next, the researcher analyzed and reviewed the transcribed text a second time for accuracy. In order to begin identifying emerging themes, the researcher reviewed the interview data within a case to begin the coding process, categorically aggregating the data by locating textual segments and assigning code labels. The team documents, teacher email responses, and parent questionnaire data were coded similarly for categorical analysis. The data were coded twice—once for descriptive purposes and once for textual themes. This analysis process was cyclical in nature and occurred simultaneously with other instances of data collection.

Emergent themes were categorized by case, keeping separate the emergent themes from rural, urban, and suburban cases. At the completion of the data collection, coding, and thematic analysis portions of the research study, case themes were analyzed for similarities and differences. Data triangulation was utilized by the researcher to increase validity. Cross-case analysis produced rich and descriptive comparative results between the different cases.

Results

A within-case analysis was conducted first, which yielded themes that represented the methods through which the interdisciplinary team of teachers attempted to maximize and manage parental involvement on their team, in their schools, and in their communities, for the students. Due to the specific demographic differences in the schools and communities in the study, the three teams had major differences in their approaches toward parental involvement. However, when a cross-case analysis was conducted, four common themes emerged. It should be noted that even though the three effective middle school teams used some common strategies, they used them in different ways. Table 1 describes the four themes that were common to all three teams, followed by the descriptions of each of the themes with the correlating supporting strategies.

Table 1. Research Cross-Case Themes

	The Three Effective Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams:
Theme 1	Believe that parental involvement is essential to student success.
Theme 2	Are open and approachable to parents.
Theme 3	Serve as a resource to the parents of adolescents.
Theme 4	Approach problem-solving opportunities with parents as a team instead of individuals.

Theme 1: Effective middle school teams believe that parental involvement is essential to student success.

All three effective middle school interdisciplinary teams in this study believe that parental involvement is essential to student success. The three middle school teams are all persistent in making parental contact because they believe it is important to do so. Whether in the form of many emails a day, phone calls to work places, notes sent home, e-newsletters, webpages, waiting for parents in the carpool lanes, or catching a hard-to-reach parent in the office, the teams are dedicated to getting as much information to parents as possible and attempting to engage the parent in the educational process.

Not surprisingly, the three middle school teams conduct parent conferences as often as possible. The teams creatively and effectively schedule their days and weeks in order to maximize opportunities to meet with parents. The teams have a built-in parent conference period during the day, and they also are willing to creatively step outside of that conference time in order to gain access to a parent (either another period or outside the school day). Two of the middle school

teams require students and parents to utilize a variety of forms of communication, including frequent emails to and from the parents, student planner signing, or a student performance contract. The urban team, due to extremely low levels of parental involvement, actually steps into the role of the parent by providing many students with parent-like advice, guidance, accountability, and mentorship. Without bypassing or ignoring the valuable contributions of the parents, they reflect their belief that the role of the parent in student success is an essential piece.

Table 2. Description of Theme 1

Effective middle school teams believe that parental involvement is essential to student success.		
Alpha Middle School	Beta Middle School	Gamma Middle School
<p><u>Therefore, they:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are persistent in making parental contacts, primarily through technology (email, web-pages, e-newsletters). • Conduct parent conferences often during their conference period or whenever the parent is available to meet. • Require students to utilize various forms of communication with parents, such as student planners and student contracts. 	<p><u>Therefore, they:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are persistent in making parental contact through face-to-face conferences and phone calls. • Conduct parent conferences often during their conference period or whenever the parent is available to meet. • Require students to utilize various forms of communication with parents, such as student planners. 	<p><u>Therefore, they:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are persistent in making parental contact through face-to-face conferences and phone calls. • Conduct parent conferences whenever parents arrive at school or over the phone. • Attempt to make up for very low parental support in the community by supporting students with parental guidance.

Theme 2: Effective middle school teams are open and approachable to parents.

All three effective middle school interdisciplinary teams in this study are open and approachable to parents. The teams establish and advertise very clear open door policies to parents, inviting them regularly and through many different methods to contact them with questions, concerns, and issues relating to their child. The teams are also intentionally friendly and welcoming in their interactions with parents. During parent nights, throughout conferences, while writing emails, or when talking over the phone, the teams are keenly aware of the verbal and nonverbal necessities that help make themselves and their team seem open and approachable. The Alpha Middle School team motto, team

spirit, and team theme—promoted weekly in the e-newsletter—are an additional method of establishing the perception of openness and approachability. Parents perceive that their child is in a welcoming and student-centered environment when the team provides students with a guiding theme for the year.

Table 3. Description of Theme 2

Effective middle school teams are open and approachable.		
Alpha Middle School	Beta Middle School	Gamma Middle School
<u>Therefore, they:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establish a clear “open door policy” through technology, team availability, and a team spirit.• Are friendly and welcoming with their words and actions.	<u>Therefore, they:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establish a clear “open door policy” through emails, phone calls, and parent nights.• Are friendly and welcoming with their words and actions.	<u>Therefore, they:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establish a clear “open door policy” through a schoolwide consistent policy.• Are friendly and welcoming with their words and actions.

Theme 3: Effective middle school teams serve as a resource to the parents of adolescents.

All three effective middle school interdisciplinary teams in this study serve as a resource to the parents of adolescents. First and foremost, the interdisciplinary teams possess extended knowledge of the unique nature of an early adolescent’s social, emotional, and cognitive development. They are always able to frame the particular challenges faced by their students through the lens of appropriate adolescent development. Furthermore, the teams are able to communicate these adolescent characteristics to the parents when necessary and appropriate. The teams possess and convey very clear proactive and reactive suggestions to parents for home-based interventions for struggling students. The teams do not hesitate to share what they feel should take place at home in order for parents to intervene positively.

In addition, the teams clearly outlined their own expectations for parents in terms of student accountability. The team from Alpha Middle School feels that most of their parents are more than capable to aid at home when their student is struggling. Additionally, the team from Alpha Middle School conveyed their overall belief that the parents of students on their team effectively establish regular expectations and procedures at home through which students may be more successful, such as a set homework time in a quiet location and environment, and so on. Beta and Gamma Middle School Teams are less optimistic about the parental efficacy represented on their team, citing that less than half

of the parents on their team have the skills and knowledge to provide support at home. Furthermore, neither of these teams express confidence that the parents of their students set regular hours and expectations for their middle school students to work on academics. These team teachers did not expect the parents of their students to be content experts and tutors—their greatest hope was for the parents on the team to be facilitators of the positive factors that contribute to effective home interventions. All three teams, however, recognize that many parents are not automatically aware of these factors or the appropriate interventions that can take place at home when a student is struggling. Therefore, the teams ensure that parents are aware of specific steps they can take to help their child be more successful in school.

Table 4. Description of Theme 3

Effective middle school teams serve as a resource to the parents of adolescents.		
Alpha Middle School	Beta Middle School	Gamma Middle School
<u>Therefore, they:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exhibit a clear understanding of the unique nature of adolescent development through ideas and strategies for success they suggest parents implement at home. • Clarify the role of the parent in facilitating middle school success. 	<u>Therefore, they:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exhibit a clear understanding of the unique nature of adolescent development through ideas and strategies for success they suggest parents implement at home. • Clarify the role of the parent in facilitating middle school success. 	<u>Therefore, they:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exhibit a clear understanding of the unique nature of adolescent development through ideas and strategies for success they suggest parents implement at home. • Clarify the role of the parent in facilitating middle school success.

Theme 4: Effective middle school teams approach problem-solving opportunities as a team rather than as individuals.

All three effective middle school interdisciplinary teams in this study approach problem-solving opportunities as a team rather than as individuals. The teachers on the teams studied are all avid proponents of the middle school team concept. All three interdisciplinary teams meet regularly each week and utilize this time to problem-solve student issues and plan appropriate interventions. Participants work together to implement the interventions as a team, including the team teachers, the student, and the parents, providing greater accountability to the student and a crossover of supportive expectations.

These team teachers nearly always conference with parents as a team instead of as individuals, lending strength and credibility to their ability as a team to influence changes in student behaviors. The team from Gamma Middle School

was the only team to entertain the option of meeting one-on-one with parents, since many of their parent conferences take place in an unplanned and impromptu manner. However, they work hard to meet with parents as a team when possible, keeping in mind that a parent conference with four teachers at once may be perceived as an intimidating environment for an unsuspecting parent. In response to this, the teams as often as possible prepared the incoming parent for this arrangement and explained its purpose. The teams from Alpha and Beta Middle Schools take teaming to the next level by establishing team procedures and expectations for behavior and academics and communicating these to the students and the parents. Only the team from Alpha Middle School, however, presents these team policies, expectations, and procedures within the context of their team goals and spirit.

Table 5. Description of Theme 4

Effective middle school teams approach problem-solving opportunities as a team rather than as individuals.		
Alpha Middle School	Beta Middle School	Gamma Middle School
<u>Therefore, they:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meet regularly each week as a team during a designated team meeting time.• Develop team approaches to student issues and convey the team plan to parents.• Conduct all parent conferences as a team.• Create team procedures, policies, and expectations and communicate them clearly within the context of team goals and objectives.	<u>Therefore, they:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meet regularly each week as a team during a designated team meeting time.• Develop team approaches to student issues and convey the team plan to parents.• Conduct all parent conferences as a team.• Create team procedures, policies, and expectations.	<u>Therefore, they:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meet regularly each week as a team during a designated team meeting time.• Develop team approaches to student issues and convey the team plan to parents.• Conduct a majority of parent conferences as a team.

Discussion

Research clearly ties high levels of parental involvement in schools to increased levels of academic achievement and overall student competence (Carr & Wilson, 1997; Griffith, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Thorkildsen & Stein, 1998). Specific parental involvement strategies for teachers and schools

have been clearly associated with increased student motivation for academic success (Bronstein, Ginsburg, & Herrera, 2005). However, definitions of parental involvement vary between parents, students, and teachers, as well as schools and geographic locations. Barge and Loges (2003) stated, “an implicit assumption in the existing research is that parents, students, and teachers hold similar conceptions of what counts as parental involvement” (p. 142). Involvement levels are heavily impacted when there is a disconnect between what schools perceive as effective parental involvement versus the perceptions of their parents on effective parental involvement (Baker, 1997a, 1997b; Barge & Loges, 2003). Middle school interdisciplinary teams will benefit from a clearly outlined and established set of parental involvement strategies constructed for middle school teams to utilize with the parents of adolescents. This current research endeavored to elucidate those strategies.

Table 6. Interdisciplinary Team Parental Involvement Strategies Categorized by Level One of the Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model (1997, 2005)

Level One Descriptor	Involvement Strategy Utilized by the Interdisciplinary Team:
Parents' Motivational Beliefs	<p>Teams educate parents regarding adolescent-specific developmental characteristics and needs.</p> <p>Teams explicitly suggest and follow up on at-home strategies for parents to implement.</p>
Parents' Perceptions of Invitations From Others	<p>Teams maintain an open and approachable attitude toward parents.</p> <p>Teams actively and continuously invite parents of struggling students to face-to-face parent conferences.</p> <p>Teams create plans of improvement requiring parent–student interaction at home.</p>
Parents' Perceived Life Contexts	<p>Teams understand the challenges unique to their community's socioeconomic status.</p> <p>Teams attempt to serve as a resource to parents who lack the time, energy, skills, or knowledge to become involved by providing specific intervention strategies.</p>

This research study has confirmed the three contributing factors toward parental involvement as described by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997, 2005). Their model of parental involvement is teacher- and school-centered, focusing on broad school attempts or specific teacher's efforts to involve parents by considering parental motivational factors, parent perceptions of invitations from others, and parents' life contexts. However, the results of this study extend beyond the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model and break new ground

by specifically identifying strategies employed by effective middle school teams in order to involve parents. As indicated in Table 6, there is a direct alignment of the involvement strategies utilized by the middle school teams and the level one descriptors in the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parental involvement (1997, 2005, see Figure 1). In conclusion, the researcher has used the results of this study to apply the Hoover-Dempsey et al. (1997, 2005) parental involvement model specifically to middle schools (see Figure 2).

What do effective middle school teams do to involve parents?

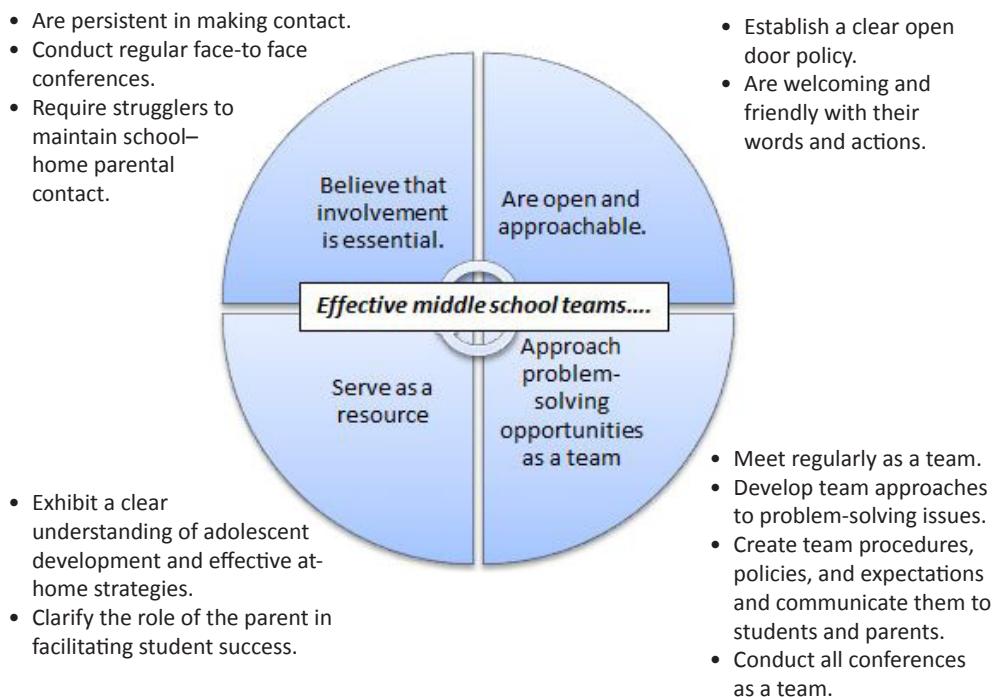


Figure 2. Model for Middle School Interdisciplinary Team Parental Involvement Strategies

The overlapping and ongoing nature of the specific parental involvement strategies utilized by the interdisciplinary teams in this study can be best represented in the cyclical model in Figure 2. The strategies did not occur in isolation or on a specific team or school timeline. The middle school teams adopted and exhibited the four overall characteristics or beliefs outlined in the central area of the model. The parental involvement strategies, located in the surrounding area of the model, emerged as evidence of their dedication to these four characteristics. As a result, four primary thematic categories were identified in this research study, and multiple strategies were listed within each

area. The creation of this middle-school-specific parental involvement model (see Figure 2) may significantly impact the current parental involvement practices of middle school interdisciplinary teams.

Interpretation of Findings

The researcher encountered several “aha” moments throughout the data collection and analysis processes. First and foremost, though, the lack of parental interest in the research study was more than noticeable. All of the parental participants included in this study were gracious, friendly, honest, and helpful. The parental focus groups and interviews were full of laughter, food, and open dialogue. However, the difficulty in getting parents to become official participants in the research study was frustrating and staggering. Without a doubt, the questionnaires were the most successful means through which parental participants were engaged. Creative means of parental participant recruitment had to be utilized. Through persistent advertising throughout the data collection period and using creative incentives, such as offering gift cards, meals, and even cash prizes, the researcher was able to recruit parents for focus groups and one-on-one interviews. Even Alpha Middle School, located in a suburban community nearly notorious for an overflow of parental involvement, was a surprisingly difficult site from which to recruit focus group participants. Out of a total of nine parent focus groups conducted across three schools, four of the focus groups had zero parents show up to participate. This phenomenon may be due to an overall lack of interest in the researcher’s study, parents placing low priority on the offer, and parental time and schedule restraints. The suburban community had families that had overbooked schedules already; therefore, participation in a research study was not high on their list of priorities.

Secondly, there was an extraordinary lack of knowledge among parents regarding the overall purpose of the middle school concept. This fact was largely evident through the statements made on the parent questionnaires and through the discussions during parent focus groups. Parents viewed interdisciplinary teaming as a means to manage a large population of students and bring down class sizes, rather than serving a developmental need or providing opportunities for crosscurricular ties in lesson planning. “Make the classes smaller” and “Help make the school smaller” were common responses from parents regarding the purpose of teaming in middle schools. However, the middle school concept offers specific benefits for students and teachers, and it would behoove parents to be knowledgeable in these areas. Overall, middle school interdisciplinary teams are tied to increased parental involvement, improved work climate, increased job satisfaction, and increased student belongingness (Erb, 1997; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999; Quine & Restine, 1995; Wallace,

1997; Warren & Payne, 2001). Middle school teams can take the lead in educating parents about the purpose of middle school teaming.

The third realization was the connection between poverty and middle school team parental involvement strategies, specifically the impact that technology has on levels of involvement, even at the school with the lowest socioeconomic status. “There is no email ever,” a Gamma team parent expressed in frustration. “They have got to get email going...lots of folks got it, and it’s a good way to keep people up [to date].” “I got it at work and could email if I need to,” another Gamma team parent exclaimed. The parent questionnaires from Gamma revealed the same frustration with lack of technology as well. Gamma parents indicated that if technology was utilized by the school (i.e., consistent email access, updated school webpage regularly), their sense of involvement with the school would increase. If Gamma Middle School had the same technological framework within their school system and the community that Alpha Middle School had, the face of parental involvement would be drastically altered. Admittedly though, the exact reliability and availability of technology in the Gamma Middle School students’ homes or with their parents’ personal devices may be restrictive in these efforts. However, in an age when technology impacts every facet of our lives, schools must keep pace.

Lastly, middle school teachers and parents struggled with finding a balance between student responsibility/independence versus forced accountability. Parents noted their own struggle to know “where the line is,” as one parent from Alpha Middle School described it. The teachers in this study longed for parents to hold their children responsible daily for assignments at home. “The parent has to take the initiative,” one teacher stated. However, the parents desire to teach responsibility to their children. “I want them to have their independence,” an Alpha team parent stated, which is a common statement from a middle school parent. “We’re trying to force our kids to make their own way with the teachers,” one parent added. “Well, you can’t be there when they graduate from college....They need to start growing up,” stated an Alpha team parent. As a result of these attitudes, many parents remained hands off until the child proved he/she could not handle the responsibility on his/her own, which frustrated teachers and caused students to fall behind.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Implications for Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams

Teachers are, many times, frustrated with the lack of involvement of many of the parents of their students. Middle school teachers, although often organized into unique team structures, rarely receive specific training regarding strategies that effectively involve parents. The data resulting from this study

may inform middle school teams regarding effective parental involvement strategies and may springboard interdisciplinary team teachers toward implementation of proven and effective parental involvement strategies (see Figure 2). If middle school interdisciplinary teams implement the strategies utilized by the effective middle school teams selected for this study, middle school students and their parents may benefit from the increased effectiveness of parental involvement strategies utilized by the team teachers.

Additionally, the parents of middle school students in this study consistently voiced a struggle between holding the student accountable and teaching them personal responsibility. “I think it’s time for her to grow up, so I am trying to back off,” one Beta Middle School parent stated. Another asked, “Where is the line?” “I don’t want to be one of those ‘helicopter parents,’” one Alpha Middle School parent claimed. The findings of this study emphasize the middle school team’s role in educating parents regarding appropriate home-based boundaries, involvement, and accountability. Many parents from this study knew that it was important for them to be involved at home, recognized their child’s need, but did not know how to do so appropriately. Middle school teams, when equipped with these interventions, can take steps to train parents on appropriate home-based interventions and strategies to support their children’s educational progress.

Implications for Teacher Preparation Programs

Additionally, teacher preparation programs may benefit from using this data to inform their own curricula regarding middle school teaming and the importance of parental involvement. “I didn’t learn this in college,” one teacher stated about strategies to involve parents; “it’s on the job training,” she continued. The teachers across all three schools consistently referred to experience and time as the best teacher of parental involvement strategies. Teacher preparation programs can address these issues directly before the teacher even enters the classroom by implementing specific learning goals for their preservice candidates related to parental involvement strategies. Specifically, teacher preparation programs should gear middle-school-specific strategies toward their candidates who are most likely to begin their careers in the middle school classroom. Learning to involve parents does not have to be “on the job training.” Teacher preparation programs can work proactively to teach these strategies.

Implications for School Administrators

The results of this research study will also aid middle school administrators in the process of creating professional development opportunities for middle school interdisciplinary team teachers to work together to involve parents in the educational process. Additionally, the data may serve as a critical component

of middle school improvement initiatives and may serve as the foundation for newly formed middle schools in creating a climate of excellence through teaming opportunities and expectations.

In order to maximize the impact of this study on the middle school interdisciplinary team structure and parental involvement, middle school teachers and leaders should consider using this data to create or continue the following initiatives:

- Middle school teachers and leaders should make every effort to educate their parents regarding the middle school concept and philosophy and the overall purposes of the middle school structure;
- Middle school teachers and leaders should evaluate the effectiveness and usage of technology in communicating with parents, as well as take full advantage of available technology grants or business partnerships for funding;
- Middle school teachers should reflect on the potential benefits of increasing the role of parental involvement at the middle school level;
- Middle school teachers and leaders should reflect on the current operational state of their middle school interdisciplinary teams;
- Middle school teachers should reflect on the current state of implementation of parental involvement strategies in their interdisciplinary teams;
- Middle school administrators should ensure that their teachers are knowledgeable about adolescent-specific cognitive, social, and emotional developmental characteristics and the challenges associated with each;
- Middle school leaders should create appropriate middle school team training opportunities for newly formed or dysfunctional middle school teams;
- Middle school administrators should train their current middle school teams with the specific strategies utilized by effective middle school teams to involve parents; and
- The Making Middle Grades Work Middle School Improvement Initiative should evaluate the parental involvement component of the program by ensuring that the middle school interdisciplinary team is the primary means through which parents are involved.

The implications for this study may extend to middle school teams, school administrators, and teacher preparation programs and have the potential to bridge the gap that often exists between middle school interdisciplinary team practices and parental involvement. However, the data from this study is limited to these three cases in these three schools and is not necessarily generalizable to every middle school teaming format, situation, and demographic setting. The strategies identified in this study as effective for involving parents may vary from year to year, grade level to grade level, or between demographic areas.

These middle school teaming strategies were identified by this study's participants as effective and may serve as a foundation for further research regarding middle school best practices.

Summary

There is tremendous potential for middle school improvement when the unit of focus is the interdisciplinary team. Wallace (2007) described the middle school team as the heart of the middle school concept; improvement in parental involvement initiatives at this level must focus on the implementation of team-related strategies. Research has clearly tied positive parental involvement in school to increased levels of academic achievement and overall student competence (Carr & Wilson, 1997; Griffith, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Thorkildsen & Stein, 1998). This study uncovered the middle-school-specific strategies that interdisciplinary teams utilized to in order to involve the parents of their students. Effective middle school teams believe that parental involvement is essential, are open and approachable to parents, serve as a resource to parents, and approach problem-solving opportunities with parents as a team. Middle school teams, acting as a unit and implementing these specific strategies, have the potential to impact students, parents, and families in lasting and substantial positive ways.

Parents who are motivated to be involved, feel invited to be involved, and are empowered with specific strategies through which they can become involved are a powerful force in the life of an adolescent. Adolescence is often a difficult developmental time, and the adolescent-parent relationship is a regular source of stress in many families (Richardson, 2004). During a developmental time in which parents typically retreat, middle school teams have the potential to turn this tide by making lasting impressions on middle school students and their parents. This article began by stating that middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers have available to them a unique "table of opportunities" but often settle for "hors d'oeuvres" (Rottier, 2000, p. 214), only sampling what can be done to engage parents as partners in their child's education. When middle school teams simply go through the motions of their structure, not fully realizing their potential, they can become stagnant. Parents become an untapped resource, and students continue down regular and worn educational paths. However, through the implementation of these parental involvement strategies specific to middle schools, teams will not have to settle for "hors d'oeuvres." Middle school teams, their students, and the students' families will feast on lasting academic progress and quality relationships upon which many years of success can be built.

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Chris Robbins has been an educator and a school leader in a variety of middle school communities since 1998 and currently serves as a school administrator in Hoover, AL. His true passion is working with small teams of teachers or entire school communities to discover how to effectively engage the parents of the students in their communities. Dr. Robbins has had the opportunity to work closely with parents, principals, new and experienced teachers, and preservice teachers through presentations and trainings regarding effective parental engagement. His other education-related areas of interest and research include creating adolescent-centered classrooms, middle school culture and climate, and middle school interdisciplinary teaming dynamics. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Chris Robbins, Berry Middle School, 4500 Jaguar Drive, Hoover, AL 35242, or email crobbins@hoover.k12.al.us

Linda Searby has been in the field of education for over 25 years. She has been an elementary school teacher, public elementary school principal, and is currently on the faculty of the Educational Leadership program at Auburn University, Auburn, AL. Dr. Searby also served as Program Coordinator of Educational Leadership at the University of Alabama at Birmingham from 2005–2011. Dr. Searby has presented extensively to principals and teachers on topics such as mentoring, the power of reflection, characteristics of stuck and moving schools, engaging women in mentoring relationships, and effective leadership. Her research centers on mentoring new principals, mentoring higher education female administrators, and mentoring graduate students.